CLAUSEWITZ AND THE PERSIAN GULF WAR

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The central conception of von Clausewitz's philosophy of war, and the basis of his reputation as perhaps the greatest of the military theoreticians, is his oft-quoted maxim, "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means".[1] Thus, to von Clausewitz, war divorced from political objectives is meaningless violence, and military objectives must of necessity be subordinate to, and designed to attain, the political objectives of the nation. In his words, "[p]olicy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument, not vice versa. No other possibility exists, then, than to subordinate the military point of view to the political".[2]

Von Clausewitz's formulation of the role of war in statecraft seems today axiomatic and almost simplistic. However, it is neither. A student of history might justifiably conclude that more often than not, war has subsumed, rather than been subordinate to, national policy. Moreover, the implications of von Clausewitz's notion are both numerous and, in many cases, subtle.

The purpose of this paper is to explore one of those implications by analyzing the meaning of "policy" and then analyzing the degree to which the conduct of the Persian Gulf War attained the Clausewitzian ideal of perfect harmony between "policy" and the use of military force.

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To von Clausewitz, the sine qua non of successful military planning and of the successful prosecution of war itself was a clear understanding of the policy to be attained and a recognition in the formulation of that policy on the limitations of the military means available. As he stated, "[n]o one starts a war--or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so--without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it".[3] Von Clausewitz recognized that policy is not static during a war, and that the course of the war will, to a greater or lesser degree, influence the political goals to be obtained.[4] However, he seems to treat policy as unitary at any given point in time; that is, that a government has a single policy (or, more properly, a single set of policies), and it is this unitary policy (whether wise or foolish) that must guide military operations. It may be that at a time when the conduct of war was (at least in Prussia) the exclusive province of the monarch[5] and war was recognized as a legitimate means of pursuing a wide variety of policies, the notion of a unitary policy was more or less valid. Today, however, at least in democratic societies, policy as it relates to the use of force exists on at least three levels: the rhetorical, the formal, and the internal.

Rhetorical policy objectives are those stated publicly to garner domestic and international support for the use of force. These rhetorical goals may be of an essentially demogogic character designed to whip up a war fever in the public at large or of a

juridical character to postulate goals that validate the use of force under international law. Because of these characteristics, rhetorical goals tend to be both inflated to overcome the reluctance of the people to go to war and articulated on a high moral plane to conform to the restrictions of international law on the use of force.

Formal goals are those stated by the political leadership to the military as the national political objectives to be accomplished by the use of military force. Given the core value in the US armed forces of civilian control of the military, formal goals are by definition the operative goals for the military, i.e., the goals that actually serve as the specific basis for military planning and that control military operations.

Finally, internal goals are national policy objectives sought to be obtained through the use of military force or that require constraints on the conduct of military operations. However, as the term is used in this analysis, internal goals are neither publicly articulated nor formally stated to the military at the operational level. It should be noted that, as used in this analysis, merely hoped-for outcomes or objectives intended to be obtained by means divorced from contemplated military operations are not "internal goals".

As stated above, in our society formal goals of necessity are

the operative goals for the military. But are these formal goals also the operative goals for the nation as a whole or even the operative goals of the civilian leadership? There is nothing in theory that requires that result. In fact, history demonstrates that very likely there will be a greater or lesser divergence between formal goals and actual national operative goals. In that divergence lie the seeds of military failure. For if military success is defined, as it must be under the Clausewitzian theory of war, as the attainment of the actual political goals of the nation, then perfect attainment of operative military goals (i.e., formal goals as defined above) constitutes a failure to the extent that the operative national and operative military goals diverge.

The dilemma of the divergence of operative military goals and operative national goals stems in part from another of the central tenets of von Clausewitz's theory of war, the "trinity" of the people, the government, and the armed forces.[6] In his theory, the people provide the will to fight, the military provides the means, and the government provides the policy. Moreover, there is a constant interrelationship among the three points of the triad and military operations: changes in any point affect not only the other points but military operations as well, and military operations in turn affect the points of the triad. Although more has been made of this "trinity" in current military thought than was perhaps intended by von Clausewitz, there is in fact an undeniable relationship among the points of his triad and both the

establishment of national goals and the conduct of military operations.

The operation of this "trinity" in the context of modern American society creates a strong tendency for rhetorical goals to become the operative goals of the nation at large. This is so for a variety of reasons. First, unlike the Kings of Prussia or more modern dictators, the President has neither the legal nor political authority to initiate unilaterally a significant use of force on the scale of Desert Storm. Accordingly, he must justify the use of force and the goals to be obtained by that use of force to both the public at large and to the Congress. Second, the American people do not view war as "merely" an instrument of policy; they are extremely reluctant to go to war, but once in war, tend to view "total victory" as the only acceptable outcome, i.e., that the war must totally solve the problem that led to the use of force in the first place. The recognition of this tendency drives the political leadership toward overstating in its rhetoric what the military is capable of accomplishing. Finally, the American people are extremely moralistic and legalistic about war. That is, the American people will support a war only for what they perceive as a high moral purpose and under circumstances which are at least arguably lawful under international law. In sum, the nature of the American people is such that the rhetoric of the civilian leadership of the Executive Branch concerning the use of force and the goals of a war tends to be both expansive and moralistic. The

allocation of legal and political authority within the American government tends to convert those rhetorical goals into the operative goals of the nation as a whole.

Although perhaps less acute, there is a further problem for the military stemming from the existence of internal goals, i.e., desired outcomes of the use of military force that are neither formally stated at the operational level nor articulated publicly. The reasons for the existence of internal goals include the lack of acceptability of the goals in either or both the domestic or international arena, legal constraints on the assignment of the internal goals as formal military goals, lack of acceptability of the goal to the military leadership, and a view that the goal, although a desired outcome of the use of military force, is not properly a military goal as such, i.e., cannot be directly accomplished by the use of force.

Internal goals are problematical on two levels. It can be argued persuasively that in a democratic and moral society a significant goal that cannot be publicly or formally stated should not be a goal at all. Whatever the merits of such an argument, it is beyond the scope of this paper. For the purposes of this analysis, internal goals cause a divergence from the Clausewitzian ideal of the use of force as a continuation of policy only when they are not stated as formal goals because they are viewed by the political leadership as outside the competence of the military.

Such a view is based on an overly restrictive notion of the nature of war, i.e., that war deals only with compellance, only with imposing our will on the enemy. In fact, war deals with the creation of a new set of political facts, the attainment of a desired condition. Although the desired new political facts or conditions expressed by the internal goal may be such that they cannot be directly accomplished by compellance, nearly always they will be such as to operate as a constraint on the use of force or as a decision factor between operational options designed to accomplish formal goals.

The prevailing view of the Persian Gulf war is that the United States attained the Clausewitzian ideal of the use of force as an instrument to attain national political objectives. The war is touted as a textbook case of the subordination of military goals and strategy to those national objectives and the formulation of operative national goals in light of the capabilities of the military means available. Certainly, there was a high degree of attention paid to the need for clear, achievable military strategic goals in order to avoid the mistakes of Vietnam and Lebanon. And indeed, there was considerable congruence between operative national goals and operative military goals. However, that congruence was neither perfect (an unattainable goal in the real world) nor as high as it could have been, because there was a highly significant rhetorical goal that was not stated as a formal goal to the military: the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

The President articulated four formal national goals to be accomplished by Operation Desert Storm: removal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait; restoration of the legitimate government of Kuwait; protection of US nationals abroad; and restoration of security and stability in the Persian Gulf region.[7] These four formal national goals led to the following specific military objectives approved by the President:[8]

- Neutralization of the Iraqi National Command Authority's ability to direct military operations.

- Ejection of Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

- Destruction of the Republican Guards in the Kuwaiti Theater of Operations.

- Destruction of known nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons production and delivery capability, to include Iraq's known ballistic missile program.

- Assistance in the restoration of the legitimate government of Kuwait.

President Bush from time to time expressed the hope that the Iraqi people would remove Saddam Hussein from power. However, at no time did the political leadership of the United States state, either informally or formally, that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was a national goal of the United States. Given international political constraints and the need to hold together a fragile coalition of Arab states, the failure to publicly articulate Saddam's overthrow as a national objective is not surprising. Why

then do I assert that his overthrow had in fact become an operative rhetorical goal? At various times during the summer and fall of 1990, in an effort to garner both domestic and international support for vigorous action in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, President Bush painted Saddam as the new Hitler, a monster who brutally used force against both neighboring States and his own people, and a continuing threat to peace and stability in the region who had and was willing to use chemical weapons and who was well on his way to acquiring nuclear weapons. The need to counter aggression was argued by repeated references to the consequences of appeasement in the 1930's. In short, President Bush demonized Saddam in order to create a crusade mentality among the American people. By so doing, he made Saddam's overthrow an operative national objective. His later failure (and perhaps, given applicable restraints, his inability) to make Saddam's overthrow a formal objective created a divergence between those formal goals and the true operative national goals in the Persian Gulf war. If in retrospect the Persian Gulf war is viewed as a less than fully successful use of military force to attain national objectives, that divergence will be the cause.

What then is the lesson to be learned? How, if in fact the overthrow of Saddam could <u>not</u> have been made into a formal military goal, either because of legal or political constraints or because it was not attainable given the military means available, could we have attained a better congruence? The answer lies *in* the

application of von Clausewitz's caution to policy-makers that war should be waged only to attain political objectives. Our leaders must recognize that in our society the rhetorical goals used to gain public support for a war become the dominant operative national goals of that war.

The implications of that simple reality are fundamental. The President must not wage war if rhetorical goals not in fact intended to be operative are needed in order to gain public support for that war. The President also must ensure that the rhetoric used by all senior officials, civilian or military, conforms to the anticipated formal objectives and hence to the operative military goals. To fail in these responsibilities is to deceive the American people, undercut the moral and legal legitimacy of the use of force, and, ultimately, to sow the seeds of military failure. As military leaders, it is our responsibility to assist the President by detecting and persuasively arguing against the use of rhetorical goals that do not conform to actual policy objectives.

1. Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 87.

2. Clausewitz, On War, p. 607.

3. Clausewitz, On War, p. 579.

4. See Clausewitz, On War, p. 92.

5. See Samuel Huntington, The Soldier and the State (New York, NY: Random House, 1957), p. 36.

6. See Clausewitz, On War, p. 89.

7. Letter from President Bush to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, dated January 18, 1991 (the "War Powers Letter" relating to the initiation of Operation Desert Storm).

8. Bard E. O'Neill and Ilana Kass, "The Persian Gulf War: A Political-Military Assessment", Comparative Strategy, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1992, p. 224.